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**Citation for published version:**

Convery, A 2014, 'Welsh Conservatism: The Unexpected Evolution' *British Politics Review*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 10-11. <<http://www.britishpoliticssociety.no/>>

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

British Politics Review

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© Convery, A. (2014). Welsh Conservatism: The Unexpected Evolution. *British Politics Review* 9 4 (pp. 10-11).

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## Welsh Conservatism: The Unexpected Evolution

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If you had asked any observers of British politics in 1999 where they thought a revival of Conservatism was likely to take place, the answer probably would not have been Wales. Wales narrowly voted for devolution and the Welsh Conservative Party was so closely integrated into British structures that you would have been entitled to question whether it was in fact a separate entity at all from the statewide party based in London. Scotland had the much more distinguished history of Unionist thought and indigenous Conservatism. It is somewhat surprising therefore that 14 years after the creation of the devolved institutions, the Scottish Conservative Party is asking whether it has lessons to learn from its Welsh colleagues. Although it is important not to exaggerate the revival of the Welsh Conservatives, it is clear that they have adapted to devolution much better than the Scottish Conservatives. After examining some Welsh Tory success, this essay suggests three key factors that helped them to find a distinctively Welsh and Conservative approach to devolution: the obvious deficiencies in the Welsh devolution settlement in 1999; the possibility of being in government in Wales; and the presence at the top of the party of a group of revisionist thinkers.

Since devolution, the Welsh Conservatives have gradually increased their representation in Cardiff and at Westminster. They now have 14 members of the Welsh Assembly, compared to just 9 in 1999; they also have 8 UK Members of Parliament in Westminster, compared to none in 1997, whereas the Scottish Conservatives have only regained one MP since the low point in 1997. It would however be misleading to present the progress gained in Wales as natural and inevitable. The Welsh Conservatives' first manifesto for the Welsh Assembly in 1999 did not suggest that they were a party at ease with devolution. On the contrary, it emphasised the dangers of the EU and of further devolution leading to the break-up of the UK. It reiterated the policy positions adopted under the last Conservative government. The Scottish Conservative manifesto in 1999 harboured a more open and constructive perspective on the new constitutional arrangements.

Later Welsh manifestos in 2003 and 2007, in contrast, adopted a much more positive tone and emphasised investment in public services and enhancement of Welsh identity and influence. This commitment to Welsh distinctiveness is a key theme that the party has pursued since Nick Bourne took over as leader from Rod Richards in 1999. 'Welshification' is an ugly word, but it perhaps best describes the strategy adopted by party elites over the past decade. What factors made such a change of direction possible?

First, the most obvious way in which the Welsh Conservatives were able to get into the debate was on the question of the devolution settlement itself. It was not necessary to be a member of Plaid Cymru in order to conclude that the balance of powers in 1999 was inadequate. The Welsh Conservatives were therefore able to support further powers for the Welsh Assembly without it seeming like a concession to nationalists or a dilution of their commitment to the Union. This led eventually to the position where nearly all elected Conservatives in Wales campaigned for a 'yes' vote in the 2011 referendum on strengthening Welsh devolution.

Secondly, unlike in Scotland, the Welsh Conservatives were able to see a path towards government. If, as some have argued, the Conservative Party exists to be in

power, then this is a powerful incentive to reform. The Welsh party system was such that any government in the Welsh Assembly that did not involve the Labour Party would have to include the Conservatives in order to have a majority. Thus, if the Conservatives wanted to be in government in Wales, they would have to be a viable coalition partner for two parties on the centre left: Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives concluded negotiations and were on the cusp of forming such a government in 2007. Indeed, they had changed so much that John Osmond concluded: 'With the Welsh Conservatives Plaid Cymru now has a serious challenger in terms of identity politics.' The prospect of being in government provided a goal and a rationale for changing the party. It is much more difficult to justify changes in a context where a party is simply attempting to be a more competent opposition.

Finally, the Welsh Conservatives were able to take advantage of these incentives because elites at the top of the party grasped the opportunity to change. The leader, Nick Bourne AM, and the chief policy adviser, David Melding AM, concluded that the only way for the Welsh Conservatives to prosper was to wholeheartedly embrace devolution and cultivate a distinctively Welsh image. Thus, in stark contrast to the 1999 manifesto that seemed hostile to devolution, the party gradually came to emphasise its commitment to Welsh distinctiveness and moderated positions on key issues like health and education. Nick Bourne's foreword to the 2007 manifesto stresses the need to invest in public services. Such sentiments prompted one Conservative councillor to complain that: 'I can't get a good number of people out working on the campaign. This is a wet, liberal manifesto that they don't want to sell on the doorstep.' Crucially, party elites tried to place themselves on the centre right of a *Welsh*, as opposed to a British, political spectrum. They began to see Cardiff, not Westminster, as the party's main focus.

This has sparked revisionist Conservative thought in other areas. Having voted 'no' to Welsh devolution in 1997, David Melding AM is now the leading Conservative thinker on how the party should respond to devolution not only in Wales but also in the rest of the UK. His book, *The Reformed Union*, which argues that the Conservatives should support federalism, is the most sophisticated attempt to imagine a Conservative future for the UK. It has also received support from Murdo Fraser MSP in Scotland. The language of federalism potentially provides a new way for Conservatives to talk about the United Kingdom, making it seem like a modern constitutional approach to working together, rather than a historical accident.

In electoral terms, the Welsh Conservatives' new approach appears to have paid off (although of course it is difficult to attribute direct cause and effect), as the party has seen a steady rise in support. In addition to a rising number of MPs and AMs, a particular highlight was the 2009 European Parliament elections, in which the Welsh Conservatives topped the poll. This success helped to sustain a narrative about the effect of the party elites' strategy. The ban on dual candidacy in Wales combined with the Conservatives' increasing vote share resulted in the leader, Nick Bourne AM, losing his seat in 2011.

However, there remain tensions in Welsh Conservatism. They have not yet been able to agree a common position on more powers for the Welsh Assembly. Although most elected Welsh Conservatives supported a 'yes' vote in the 2011 referendum, they were not obliged to do so by a common party position. Moreover, the party still lacks formal autonomy from the centre. The leader of the Welsh Conservatives is still technically David Cameron, not Andrew R.T. Davies in Cardiff. As Welsh devolution evolves, it will be interesting to see how the party balances

different Conservative opinions about strengthening the Assembly and creating a more autonomous party structure. The abrupt cancellation of the Welsh Conservative Party conference in 2012 suggests that the party still has work to do in establishing itself as a distinct and serious force within the Conservative Party.

The journey of the Welsh Conservatives also underlines wider points about the Conservative Party's attitude to devolution. As in Scotland, the central UK party remains mostly relaxed about sub-state party autonomy, provided it does not interfere with the main objective of achieving a majority government at Westminster. In addition, ironically, the lack of attention paid at the centre to creating distinct Welsh party structures might have helped party elites. The absence of a powerful party central office bureaucracy (which had existed in Scotland for many years and was been retained after devolution) and the creation of a relatively weak Welsh Party Board resulted in fewer constraints for the leadership in the Assembly. In promising further powers for the Assembly, the Welsh Conservatives must also rely on decisions made at the centre of the party about how much it is prepared to devolve.

The unexpected success of the Welsh Conservatives stands out as an example of how British Conservatism can adapt to new circumstances while retaining a commitment to the Union. The political opportunity structure in Wales clearly provided a more favourable context for rethinking Conservatism than is the case in Scotland and it is important not to exaggerate aspects of their success. However, crucially, the Welsh Conservative Party had elected politicians who were prepared to think creatively about their response to the changing nature of the UK. This has been the key to their success.